

Trip Report for the Northern Tier Canoe Trip, August 10-18, 2003

Calvin Gabriel, adult trek leader
9-6-03

This is a weeklong wilderness canoeing expedition out of the Northern Tier National High Adventure Base in Ely, MN. Crews travel separately over routes that are physically demanding, covering 50-100 miles on the water and 15-50 portages between lakes and rivers in the canoe country of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness of northern Minnesota or the Quetico Provincial Park of southern Ontario. The minimum age for Scouts is 13. Total cost for the trip is about \$750.

Participants

We originally had 14 people sign up and pay deposits, but two had to drop out because of schedule conflicts, so 12 people went on the trip. Like Philmont, Northern Tier uses the crew concept where 6-8 Scouts and adults are blended together into something like a patrol, with a Scout acting as the crew chief and making as many decisions as possible. The crew chief is trained and supported by the adult crew advisor and the adult interpreter, a Northern Tier staff member who accompanies and “guides” the crew.

In our case, each crew had four Scouts and two adults (the minimum size) plus the interpreter, paddling together in three canoes. In each crew, two canoes had two people in them, and one canoe had three. The crews were designated by Northern Tier as E081103F and G, meaning the trips started from Ely on 8/11/03, with a letter to distinguish between crews starting on the same day. We referred to the crews as F and G for short. Each crew had an adult advisor (Ray for G and me for F) and a Scout crew chief. Doug H. (F) and Steve P. (G) did excellent jobs as chiefs of their crews, and I heard many positive comments about their performance.

Crew F

1. Doug H., 13 (crew chief)
2. Trevor G., 13
3. John W., 14
4. Jeremy W., 14
5. Cal Gabriel (crew advisor and adult trek leader)
6. Craig Hofstetter (adult)
7. Brian Pomeroy (adult interpreter, NT staff)

Crew G

1. Steve P., 17 (crew chief)
2. Alex C., 15
3. Tony C., 13
4. Lawrence L., 14
5. Ray Chu (crew advisor)
6. David Lee (adult)
7. Tanya Patrone (adult interpreter, NT staff)

Costs

The cost of the trip was about \$750 per person as summarized in the table below. Crew G upgraded two of their canoes to lightweight Kevlar (44 pounds compared to 75 pounds for the standard Alumacraft aluminum canoes) to ease portaging. The upgrade cost was \$150 per canoe, which Ray and David each paid—it is not reflected below. Crew F had some additional expenses because Canada charges more for time in the Quetico than the US charges for the Boundary Waters. The amount Northern Tier charges seems fair and we tried hard to keep other expenses to a minimum, but this is simply not a cheap trip coming from California.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Approximate Per Person Cost</i>
Northern Tier charge (outfitting for 6 days on the water plus 2 days on the base)	\$308
Northwest Airlines group rate for San Jose to Minneapolis, round trip	\$283
15-passenger van rental, insurance, and gas	\$90
Crew T-shirt and neckerchief	\$27
International Wolf Center admission	\$7
Misc. (pizza, crew photo)	\$3
Crew F Canada expenses (extra camping fees, Canadian fishing license)	\$41 (F only)
Total Cost	\$759 (F) or \$718 (G)

Preparations

For a major high adventure trip like Northern Tier, significant preparations are required. This includes (1) planning of crews, routes, and equipment; and (2) training in canoe trekking, paddling, and portaging.

Planning

Planning began in August 2002. At Camp Whitsett, Nick G. learned about Northern Tier from a friend he met there and suggested it to Brian Latona and me as we walked along a path together. I was immediately interested and happily blurted out, “Dibs on being the adult trek leader!” My childhood troop went to the Boundary Waters many times when I was a Scout and it was the highlight of our year. We had always gone there on our own as a troop, so I wasn’t familiar with Northern Tier until I studied their website (www.ntier.org) and called them. They still had a few openings for summer 2003, but only early and late season (mid-June and mid-August). To avoid conflicts with school and to allow more summer time for canoe training, we decided to reserve mid-August crew slots.

Each crew consists of 6-8 people plus an interpreter supplied by Northern Tier. At least two adults are required in each crew, one of whom must be over 21. There must be a majority of boys in each crew. Trips are 7-10 days long—we chose seven days. In the curious Northern Tier time accounting method, that means spending six days and five nights on the water, plus two nights and parts of two days at the base. We took sign-ups and deposits and had the correct amount for two crews of seven each (five Scouts and two adults). Later, Nick and Sejin K. dropped out because of conflicts with the time that we would be at Northern Tier.

During the fall of 2002, we received Northern Tier’s planning material, formed the crews, and discussed what everyone needed to do to prepare—buying the right equipment, building up their physical strength, and participating in canoe training and trips.

The crews met periodically to update plans, collect deposits, and discuss equipment. Northern Tier provides a comprehensive list of what to bring, but there was still a lot of judgment that needed to be applied. Most equipment is identical to what is needed for high adventure backpacking. Only Steve had been to Philmont, so I asked him to give us a packing demonstration. He led a very important meeting in early June where he came completely packed with all the gear he was going to bring to Northern Tier. He went through each item and explained how he made each choice. Both crews greatly benefited from Steve’s extensive backpacking experience that day. Steve also acted as the senior crew chief when we were traveling as combined crews.

Some families spent a lot of money—hundreds of dollars per person—on good equipment like lightweight sleeping bags that resisted and tolerated getting wet, all-synthetic clothes including underwear, waterproof/breathable rain jackets and pants, etc. These items will continue to be useful for backpacking and are only slowly outgrown.

The main unique expense for this trip for some was the boots. Northern Tier follows the “wet-boot” technique, where you enter and exit the canoes in water up to your knees or thighs, so boots (and clothes) must tolerate staying wet all day. Thus, the boots must *not* be waterproof but should instead drain water quickly and not fall apart when wet. It is also very important to have sturdy soles and sides covering the anklebone to protect the feet and ankles on the very rugged Quetico portages. Most of us elected to buy the Chota Quetico Trekker, which was exactly designed for this purpose but expensive at over \$100 including shipping from Piragis Northwoods Company in Ely, MN. The remaining people chose to buy inexpensive but good quality Hi-Tec boots having nylon panels for draining water, and one punched a couple of holes in the leather insole to speed the draining. No one complained about his boots and no one had foot or ankle injuries, so both approaches seem appropriate for the future.

To avoid getting trench foot, we carefully dried our feet and applied foot powder each night before putting on dry camp socks and shoes—this quickly became a welcome and comforting ritual after a hard day’s work slogging through water and muck.

Training

The troop requires participants in longer water treks to have Swimming, Canoeing, and First Aid merit badges. Participation in a troop canoe trip such as Russian River is also required, and Lifesaving merit badge and First Aid/CPR certification are strongly encouraged. Everyone already had Swimming and Canoeing merit badges and

during the months leading up to the trip they met all the requirements. It certainly helped that John Lucas held First Aid merit badge classes after this policy was announced, as did Craig Hofstetter for Lifesaving merit badge. Brian Latona brought in the Red Cross to certify the troop, and our crews in particular, in First Aid and CPR. Both crews went to Russian River and Cache Canyon, completing Whitewater merit badge along the way, except for Steve who missed Cache Canyon because of a work commitment. Most also went on the Elkhorn Slough kayaking trek.

Because Doug had never been a Scout trek leader before, he agreed to lead both the Russian River and Cache Canyon treks to gain experience before holding the important position of crew chief. We worked together closely in the weeks leading up to these treks, and he learned and grew a lot. It was clear at Cache Canyon that the Scouts were comfortable with him as the leader. This growth continued at Northern Tier, where he quickly gained confidence and respect from the crew and showed good signs of being a future troop leader.

Although Alex was not a crew chief at Northern Tier, he began putting his leadership skills to use by being the Scout trek leader for Elkhorn Slough—so Northern Tier crewmembers provided the troop with leadership for all of this summer's water treks.

Over the summer I worked with each crewmember on paddling proficiency until they reached the level I deemed necessary for wilderness canoe tripping. My emphasis was on perfecting their strokes to be efficient and comfortable, and for bow and stern to work together and be synchronized. This turned out to be very important since we paddled as much as ten hours per day. Everyone spent at least two hours with me. Many spent four hours, and Trevor and Ray spent six. Ray took his responsibility as advisor of Crew G very seriously, and worked hard to become as proficient as possible so that he could set the standard for that crew.

Part way through our trip, our interpreter told me what I had been hoping to hear: He had taken six crews out that summer, and he said that ours was about the youngest but the best prepared of any of them. The interpreter for Crew G was also impressed with how prepared they were, and Ray told me later that his Scouts were proud at how they were able to paddle in a straight line on the first day when they saw other crews winding all over Moose Lake.

Itinerary/Journal

This itinerary, based on my journal entries, will cover both crews for the sections where we traveled together, but only Crew F while on the water. Ray kept a journal on the experiences of Crew G.

Sunday, August 10, 2003—Day -1

Cupertino, CA → San Jose airport → Minneapolis/St. Paul airport → Excelsior, MN (1613 miles)

We met at the San Jose airport beginning at 4:35am and checked in as a group at Northwest Airlines. We were all in full Class A uniforms except David, who is a member of the troop committee but not a uniformed leader, and Craig, who as a Northwest pilot would be riding for free on the jumpseat in the cockpit, where he couldn't wear a Scout uniform (too bad—with a bright and cheery smile he could have proudly told curious First Class passengers that he was working on his Flying merit badge). The flight left on time at 6:40am, we arrived in Minneapolis a little early at 12:10pm, our gear was waiting when we got to baggage claim, and we were shuttled to the off-site Thrifty car rental site where our 15-passenger van was waiting. It was a tight fit for 12 people plus all the gear (though on the way back from Ely we discovered that we could actually fit in 13 people and gear—but no more!—if we packed it very carefully).

We drove to my parents' home in Excelsior, MN, on the shores of Lake Minnetonka. They warmly welcomed us at 1:15pm with a corn-shucking contest (won by Jeremy, who shucked 13 ears) and we had freshly steamed corn-on-the-cob and a hotdish for late lunch at 2pm. They also took double-crew photographs just before we changed out of our Class A uniforms.

After lunch, we carried my dad's three Grumman aluminum canoes to the water, put on portaging yokes, and practiced wet-boot portaging and paddling from 3-5pm. Each person had an opportunity to lift and carry a canoe just the way we would be doing it at Northern Tier, although here we were enjoying a nicely sloped sandy bottom, which was something we saw only once again after that. Even Scouts were able to lift canoes using the wet-boot technique, except Trevor and Tony (too small) and Lawrence (we didn't want him to aggravate the tendonitis in his wrist). For those who didn't lift a canoe, we set the canoe on their shoulders so they could experience carrying a canoe. An unusually strong 13-year-old like Doug can lift and carry an aluminum canoe, but more typically it takes a 14- or 15-year-old to be able to do that.

After portaging practice, we sent each crew out in three canoes to paddle as a crew for the first time, going a little under a mile around Treasure Island. The other crew stayed behind to enjoy swimming, eating watermelon and Emily's cake, playing in a dugout canoe from Colombia or paddling the birch bark canoe my dad built with a Native American friend as a young man.

Next we drove with my dad out to a remote country site to enjoy firearms shooting using his Marlin 39A lever-action .22 rifle, Savage breech-loading .22/12-gauge over-and-under rifle-shotgun, .38-caliber revolver, and Winchester Model 94 lever-action .30/30 rifle. Dad and I taught firearms safety and holding techniques, and everyone had a lot of fun shooting up targets against a hillside. Afterwards, Craig and a group of Scouts carefully cleaned each gun.

Dinner was take-out pizza, root beer floats, and leftovers from lunch, followed by an award presentation from my parents to Jeremy the champion corn-shucker and an early bedtime of about 10pm. It was a very warm night, and most people slept on top of sleeping bags, which were scattered on floors, couches, and beds throughout the house.

Monday, August 11—Day 0

Excelsior → Ely (285 miles)

We got up at 5:30am, sipped orange juice and carried breakfast bars to the van. We repacked the van with our overnight bags and drove away at 6:20am. We stopped for breakfast at McDonald's in Cloquet, near Duluth, at 8:45am. We left at 9:15am and continued north, stopping at 11:10am at the International Wolf Center in Ely. We heard a presentation on the similarities of wolves and dogs and got good looks at the two resident Arctic wolves at the center. At about noon, we drove to Dairy Queen for lunch, and left at 12:30pm for the Northern Tier base. We arrived at the entrance at 12:55pm and stopped for crew pictures in front of the colorful Northern Tier sign. At 12:59pm (we were supposed to arrive at 1pm), we drove into the parking lot and met our interpreters, who were waiting for us at the stockade across from the parking lot.

Crew F was assigned Brian Pomeroy as interpreter, a sophomore from Penn State studying aeronautical engineering. Crew G was assigned Tanya Patrone. We split up, toured the base, checked out some food and equipment, tested setting up our tents (a four-man tent for the Scouts and a two-man tent for the adults, with the interpreter having his own tent), and moved our gear into the hexagonal "first-night" crew cabin. Brian had us lay all our individual equipment out and he approved or disapproved of each item, talking us into leaving behind our fleece coats (we relied on raincoats and PFDs for warmth), our second T-shirts (we wore one T-shirt through the whole week), our spare pair of liner/outer socks (we had one double pair that stayed wet all week and one dry pair for camp), our plastic trowels for digging individual cat-hole latrines (a metal shovel was included in our kettle pack, and plastic trowels aren't tough enough for the rocky Quetico), and our second pair of underwear (we wore a swimsuit during the day so we only needed underwear for the sleeping bag).

Then we laid out shared crew items and narrowed things down further, leaving behind plastic ground cloths, bringing our lighter-weight bear bag system, three containers of sunblock and three of mosquito repellent (leaving anything but DEET behind), 8 oz. of Sanigel (we ended up using only about 4 oz.), and only selected energy- and morale-boosting snacks—2.5 servings of Gu energy gel and one Snickers bar per person, four bags of lemon drops (we only needed two bags), and two large packs of gum (we only chewed one). Northern Tier provided plenty of good food, so we didn't need heavy and filling snacks like PowerBars. As it turned out, the Gu was the most treasured item, and we carefully used it before the worst stretches of paddling into the wind or crossing tough portages. In the future, it might be good to skip the Snickers and most or all of the lemon drops and instead bring one serving of Gu per day so you can identify the worst point of each day and get a Gu boost to help you through it. The gum is useful for taking your mind off tough portages.

We had a crew meeting to decide on the route. Brian told us that the route we had been thinking of, which goes up the Man Chain and comes back down Knife Lake, would cover border lakes that are shared with Boundary Waters visitors and therefore would not feel as remote. He assessed us and described an 85-mile route with 41 portages totaling over 5 miles that goes from Moose Lake to Prairie Portage and Carp Lake through the Man Chain, then turning north across Saganagons Lake, the Falls Chain, McEwen Lake and Creek (prime moose country and so peppered with portages that we knew we would not see many people), Louisa Lake (great for night paddling), Louisa Falls, Agnes, and Basswood back through Prairie Portage to base. His description was intriguing and we discussed it carefully as a crew—it would be a big physical challenge for us but it could be lots of fun and very rewarding. We chose a last-chance decision point on Saganagons—if we reached that point by the end of Day 2, we could turn north and take the tough route. But if we straggled and got there on Day 3, we could turn south and take the easier bailout route through Knife Lake. We all agreed to the plan.

Afterwards, we had BBQ chicken/salad bar dinner and attended an orientation—a US Forest Service movie on rules and regulations for backcountry traveling and a lecture on safety (e.g. no cliff jumping over five feet) and a demonstration of Scout's Own devotions for the trip. Trevor will be our chaplain's aide. Finally we visited the trading post to buy two map cases and two sets of maps that covered our route, and then headed back to our cabins to fold maps, pack, and try to sleep at about 10pm. Most people used the earplugs I had brought along for that purpose, diminishing the snoring noise from an unnamed crewmember—too bad I had not considered the need for nose plugs, as another crewmember was having serious digestion problems.

Tuesday, August 12—Day 1

Sommers Base → 5 r. → Moose L. → Newfound L. → Sucker L. → Prairie Portage (Canadian customs—we don't cross the portage) → Sucker L. → Birch L. → 40 r. → Carp L. → 73 r. → Emerald L. (18.3 miles and 3 portages)

We woke up to a brisk, chilly morning at 6am, did final packing, put everything we didn't need in the van, and had breakfast at 7:00am (French toast, a donut, and sausages). Then we checked out our fresh food, one gallon of stove fuel, canoes, paddles and PFDs, and headed for the water. Crew F entered the Boundary Waters at 8:30am, just behind the even more efficient Crew G, and started paddling on Moose Lake.

In Crew F, Craig was duffing in Brian's canoe, and Brian asked him about the papers needed to clear Canadian customs. Craig called the question up to me, and I realized that I had left all those in the van—the Remote Area Border Crossing permits for Craig and me, the Quetico entry permit, the notarized parental permission forms, and the Youth Manifest. Yikes! Fortunately we were only a few minutes out so we turned around and I retrieved all the papers, feeling very sheepish and imagining everyone wondering what else their advisor forgot. During check-in at the Welcome Cabin, I had proudly laid out all my meticulous paperwork, and when they checked it off, I guess I subconsciously considered it complete without stopping to ponder what might be needed at Customs. We restarted the trip at 8:50am. By then, Crew G was out of sight—we wouldn't see them again until returning to base.

Jeremy was my bowman at the beginning of the trip, and I was happy to see he remembered his lessons and provided our canoe with a strong, steady bowstroke. Through the week, it got stronger and steadier, and he became a very confident paddler in the bow and stern by the end. In fact, late in the week it was pretty common to see Jeremy calmly sterning a canoe.

We paddled six miles or so through several lakes connected without portages and stopped at 11:15am at Canadian customs at Prairie Portage (although we didn't portage our gear—we just checked in and then returned to Sucker Lake). After waiting for the crew ahead of us to finish, Craig, Brian, and I went in to the Customs building and sat down as they examined our papers. Everything was OK. I used my Visa card to pay the Canadian fees and buy a fishing license for Craig, which covered all the boys too. We left at 11:45am and stopped for lunch (squashed bread with fresh turkey, cheese, and mustard, plus an apple or orange) at 12:15pm.

Throughout the trip, any break or lunch stop was done at a campsite so we could thoroughly clean it as part of the Quetico Provincial Park Adopt-a-Lake program we decided to participate in (and get an emblem for, to the delight of a certain unnamed patch-collecting Scout). We ended up cleaning 18 campsites—even more than the 15 required. And apart from the portages where we pulled canoes through rapids, we also policed portages at both ends and along the trails, sometimes sending runners back to pick up bits of trash spotted while carrying a canoe—it's not easy or very safe to do a deep knee bend to pick up something while wearing 75 pounds of aluminum on your shoulders.

Between cleaning 18 campsites and about 36 portages, I calculated that this was enough to add up to the 10 hours needed for the 50-miler award. Crew G also earned the 50-miler, cleaning their campsites plus spending six hours cleaning Stevens Creek Reservoir a couple of weeks after getting home. Trash-spotting became such a habit that even now I still find myself scanning the ground for litter—and picking it up—wherever I go.

We carried all the garbage back to base, of course, by sticking it in the food pack in the same plastic bags we emptied at mealtimes, which probably explains why the food pack barely got lighter and never seemed to get emptier. Scrambling of the food-bag contents might also explain some mysteriously crunchy items that seemed to appear in our meals near the end of the week. We cleaned every fire pit we came across, and every single one had many bits of foil in it. Stirring the ashes and extracting foil and half-burned trash from the fire pit was the worst cleanup job, perhaps rivaled only by discovering...and picking up...and packing out...used toilet paper where the user had failed to dig a cat-hole. We also found many twist-ties (Brian collected them and ended up with about 20) and lots of paper scraps plus styrofoam, broken glass, socks, a glove, tin cans, duct tape, a penny, used band-aids, knotted fishing line, and a rusted one-gallon gas can. We didn't have the necessary tools to extract the nails and spikes we sometimes found in trees. Occasionally someone scored a useful item like a compass or a pair of sunglasses. Some campsites seemed at first glance to have bits of paper scattered about, but on closer inspection these turned out to be wisps of birch bark—we called it Mother Nature's Trash.

On one lake I had Doug for a bowman. Not surprisingly, he had good form and easily powered our canoe. I didn't need much of a J-stroke to keep us going straight. With energy to spare, we paddled and talked about leadership and decision-making techniques that he could apply in his role as crew chief.

There was another 12 miles to go to get to Emerald Lake, including a tough 73-rod portage. Along the way we saw a bald eagle, a great blue heron, and many loons. We arrived at our campsite at 4:30pm pretty drained, but Doug quickly assigned tasks and everyone immediately went to work pitching camp, collecting and purifying several gallons of water (one drop of bleach per quart, plus an extra drop to be sure—during the day we either added bleach right to our Nalgene bottles or we pumped water into them through a water filter; once we used iodine tablets just to check out the taste), setting up the bear bag system (it was difficult to find two trees with forks at the right height, and throwing ropes over them was a challenge because the rough and sticky bark kept grabbing the rope), and cooking dinner—beef fajitas, our last fresh meal and a welcome lightening of the food pack.

As darkness approached, we had a crew meeting that was to become the pattern for every night, beginning with Thorns, Roses, and Buds. Here we took turns sharing events or thoughts from the day that we found challenging (a thorn) or really liked (a rose), and what we were looking forward to seeing or achieving in the future (a bud). After that, Brian would read a page from Sigurd Olson's The Singing Wilderness to inspire us and to better open our eyes to the wilderness we were traveling through.

Unfortunately, another part of the nightly pattern was everyone swatting mosquitoes while this was going on—fortunately, they were only really annoying at dusk. (Sometimes in the middle of the day we got attacked by horse flies or by “canoe flies”—annoying little creatures that buzz around the bottom of the canoe, hiding at the edge of your socks and chewing on your ankles while you try to paddle.)

Brian always left us with a final thought to ponder as we headed to bed, and on that first night we were so tired we took those thoughts directly to bed at 8:50pm. The boys went to bed a little too directly. It wasn't long before they all had to come out of the tent to take care of their final business...and once back inside they again had to go through a search-and-destroy mission for renegade mosquito terrorists that had breached their defensive perimeter netting.

Mosquitoes were thicker than we had expected on the trip, partly because this year's late rains had provided a late crop of them. Taking Vitamin B-1 ahead of time didn't seem to make a difference, compared to those who didn't take it. DEET was pretty effective, but we didn't always bother with it. In Crew G, Steve reported that he never used bug spray (or sunblock) all week—he just wore long pants and long-sleeved shirts. No one in either crew ever wore a mosquito headnet...except Craig when portraying the “grizzled bear” in Crew F's Rendezvous skit.

Our campsite was at the tip of land, surrounded by the water of Emerald Lake. Loons serenaded us from all around with their entire variety of calls throughout the night. I've never been so happy to be awoken again and again on a campout.

Wednesday, August 13—Day 2 (the toughest one!)

Emerald L. → 40 r. → Unnamed L. → 30 r. → That Man L. → 101 r. → No Man L. → 32 r. → This Man L. → 49 r. → Other Man L. → 39 r. Unnamed L. → 4 r. → Unnamed L. → 21 r. → Bell L. → 18 r. → Unnamed L. → 74 r. → Fran L. → 5 r. → Slate L. → 8 r. → Saganagons L. (16.3 miles and 12 portages)

We didn't realize it at the time, but this was going to be the toughest day of the trip. It included paddling over 16 miles and crossing 12 portages. Innocently we got up at 5am, our earliest rising of the week, packed, ate breakfast bars and handfuls of loose granola, and were on the water at 6:15am, just after sunrise. It was a perfect start—the sky was a gorgeous mix of pastel colors, there was no wind, and we canoed through a thick mist rising off the water. We felt like Voyageurs paddling in the mist. Then we hit our first portage and the going got really tough.

The first two portages are shown on the map without saying how long they are, which we found suspicious, and Brian had never taken this little leg—it turned out these were short but extremely rugged portages, and we all burned up a lot of energy getting loaded and crossing the difficult terrain. We were falling on rocks and logs at the beginning while still in the water (I often found myself panting at the *start* of the portage, once I got the canoe up for good), and we just got more and more worn out as the day progressed. For me, the 74-rod portage onto Fran Lake was the toughest, coming near the end of a very long day and requiring several attempts to throw up the canoe with my weakened arms at a very unstable loading spot. My reward for surviving was to ride duffer across Fran in Brian's canoe.

Lunch was salami and cheese on pita bread, along with great gorp. Paddling and more paddling followed, along with portage after portage.

John and Doug were able to carry canoes on a short portage near the end of the day, and that brightened our spirits. Jeremy took over and mastered “The Beast,” the food pack that felt to me like 100 pounds on Day 1 (Brian said it weighed 80 pounds, but it had all the food for 7 people for 6 days). It was like carrying a dead body, yet Doug and John had each carried it over one portage on the first day when it was heaviest. At an early portage, John carried the food pack and as he struggled to get it on and maintain his balance on the slippery rocks, just before almost falling over he quietly said “Gosh.” [Ed.: This is the actual word he used, and note also the lack of an exclamation point.] Knowing John, this set off an alarm bell in my head and I lunged for the food pack in time to keep it and him from collapsing onto the sharp rocks. After this, the crew often talked somberly about the time John said “Gosh,” and we pondered what catastrophe had been averted by his siren call for help. It also served as a metric for us: You know you're on a tough trek when John says “Gosh.”

We finally made it to Saganagons Lake at 4:30pm (having spent over 10 hours on the water) and pitched camp. We were about as exhausted as we'd be on the whole trip, and probably we were all wondering what we'd gotten ourselves into. Dinner, eaten in the entertaining presence of a chipmunk, was MRE beef and pasta plus dehydrated peas. Doug made dessert—brownies that didn't quite harden so we called it fudge, cooked in a double boiler. It was amazingly good; every cooking implement that had been used was stripped clean of any possible fudge-like molecule, and probably the first monolayer of aluminum, before ever touching dishwater. We collapsed into our sleeping bags at 9:30pm, with Doug announcing a 5:30am wake-up for tomorrow.

Thursday, August 14—Day 3

Saganagons L. → 75 r. across a peninsula → Saganagons L. again → 56 r. → Falls Chain L. 1 → 20 r. → Falls Chain L. 2 → 8 r. → Falls Chain L. 3 → 16 r. → Wet L. → 24 r. → McEwen L. (12.3 miles and 6 portages)

We got up at 5:30am for a breakfast of instant oatmeal mixed individually in your cup with a splash of cold water. Surprisingly, it's not bad, but perhaps our standards have been lowered just a bit. We broke camp and paddled away at 6:50am.

After going north on Saganagons through marshes and along a huge burn area, at one point taking a shortcut portage across a peninsula known as “Dead Man's Portage” (we never saw one), we moved into the Falls Chain. We could tell we were getting a little smoother at the portages, although it still took longer than ideal for unloading the packs onto the Scouts, and almost always they had to wait for one or two of the adult-carried canoes to arrive at the other end. They usually chose to drop their packs on a rock rather than following the prescribed method of hunching over and patiently waiting until a canoe arrived to drop the pack into. Throughout the trip we were always able to do one-trip portages, though often the fastest portager would drop his pack and come back to see if anyone needed help.

John was particularly good at that helpful service. On one portage, it was “boys carry canoes”—Doug, John, and Jeremy. Jeremy used the proper wet-boot technique and threw the canoe up by himself on his first try.

We took a break at 9:10am and cleaned a campsite.

It was very enjoyable moving from lake to lake along a chain of waterfalls—fun to look at, to wade around in, and at the last falls, to play in. Unfortunately, the boys got covered with little worms that clung to them like baby leeches by sucking their skin and then holding the rest of their inch-long bodies out to flail in the air...and suddenly it was no fun to play in the falls. Then the falls were behind us and we saw the lake ahead of us had whitecaps heading in our direction. Most of us shifted to the kneeling position for maximum stability and efficiency. We’d be paddling into a stiff wind the rest of the day and most of the next day.

We stopped at a small island campsite to take a break from the wind at 11:10am, and cleaned it while waiting for the last canoe to catch up. We distributed Gu energy gel to get us through the heavy into-the-wind paddling. Lunch (and another cleaned campsite) was at 12:15pm—PB&J on bagels with breakfast bars, dried fruit, raisins, and animal crackers.

At one portage we skipped the trail and hauled our canoes upstream through rapids. We did this several times over the course of the week—sometimes it ended up being more work than just portaging, because at times we had to lift the fully loaded canoes over jumbles of rocks while water was rushing at us. At a short portage, we did a 6-man carry of each fully loaded canoe across the trail.

A loon popped up a few feet from my canoe—it pointed a red eye set in a deep black hood at me, and I could clearly see every detail in its black-and-white checked back. This is the most ancient bird in North America, but it is so beautiful! It studied us briefly and then disappeared into the water. Even though I kept my camera in my PFD pocket (secured in a marine case), I knew there was no time to pull it out, turn it on, and take a picture, so I just enjoyed the view while I had it. We also saw an otter, a bald eagle, and merganser ducks.

We entered McEwen Lake around 3pm and looked for a place to camp as we fought our way into a strong wind, sometimes paddling hard forward just to stay in place. Our arms were tired but no one was complaining—come to think of it, no one complained the whole trip. The first campsite we saw was already taken. There was an island with a nice campsite on it, and Doug and Brian scouted it. The island was too small for us to dig cat-holes so we checked out another island—but that one didn’t seem to have been used as a campsite before. Doug wanted to continue on, but in our only (and gentle) rebellion, we talked him into staying at the little island. As it turned out, it was a great little private island and the breeze kept the bugs mostly away. Despite being small, the jumble of boulders, pine trees, and fir trees left many places for each to read, fish, rest, or reflect on the trip, and ponder what lay ahead. The only trouble was needing to canoe to a larger island for going to the bathroom, but even that became an amusing evening and morning expedition. There were still hours of sunlight left so we set up camp and fished.

Dinner was chicken/pasta glop and blueberry coffee cake, slow-baked in Northern Tier’s famous double-boiler “oven” set on our Peak I gas stove. Brian had to make the cake with dehydrated blueberries, unfortunately—we only saw a few wild blueberries and raspberries on this trip because it was too late in the season. No one complained about the ingredient substitution, and the cake tasted fantastic. The Northern Tier menu included lots of treats like this, and Brian was an expert at all of them—he was a good cooking instructor, too. The Scouts cooked dinner for the crew all week with his guidance. He taught them how to clean up, too (of course, mostly we used the Philmont cleaning technique, where residual food is removed from pots and plates using a swirl of water into the mouth followed by abrasive licking or scraping if needed). We avoided creating unnecessary wastewater, because it couldn’t just be poured into the lake or on the ground—we’d walk 200 feet from water and dig a sump hole for it.

The fishing poles came out for the first time and Craig and the Scouts took turns fishing. Craig and Doug each caught a foot-long trout, but both fish flopped off the hook before they could land them. Jeremy caught a 6” trout and we let it go. Finally John caught a 2.5-pound 15” smallmouth bass—a beauty. John and Craig cleaned it on a different island to avoid attracting a bear to ours for the scraps, then John fried it up and we all shared it. What a celebration! There’s nothing like the smell (followed by the taste) of frying fish. We christened the island “Bass Island” and frequently praised John for his catch.

Spirits were much higher today. Even paddling for hours into a heavy wind didn't dampen them. Seeing waterfalls and arriving at camp early enough for most of the boys to swim a quarter mile in a swamped canoe (sort of a challenge concocted by Brian) and to fish made a big difference. We don't know what lies ahead, but no matter what, it won't be as tough as Day 2...right?

Friday, August 15—Day 4

McEwen L. → McEwen Ck. → 8 r. → Unnamed L. → 25 r. → Glacier L. → 23 r. → McEwen Ck. → 15 r. → Turn L. → 16 r. → Unnamed L. → 8 r. → Edge L. → 16 r. → Rod L. → McEwen Ck. → 8 r. → Dumas L. → 72 r. → Fauquier L. → 52 r. → Star L. → 25 r. → Arp L. → 96 r. → Louisa L. (16.7 miles and 12 portages)

Up at 5:30am per Doug's judgment about what we needed to do to stay on target for our route. As usual, everyone rose promptly and obediently—there were never problems with slackers in camp or canoes or on portage trails. Breakfast was handfuls of granola. We watched bald eagles flying around across from our camp on Bass Island. A trip to "Cr*p Island" to relieve ourselves slowed things down, so we didn't get away until 7:10am.

We set out on McEwen Lake, into the wind again. Fortunately, the lake eventually narrowed down and became McEwen Creek, which was small and wound around a lot, so the wind stopped affecting us. We took a break at 9:00am. Brian pulled us together and told us to paddle quietly without talking—around any bend in the marshy creek there could be a moose feeding. We paddled for a couple of hours without seeing one, but even so this was a fun way to travel—very little effort, so calm, and we were intently focused on the scenery and any hint of wildlife rather than being, as Craig put it after the non-stop slog of Day 2, "stuck on a canoeing treadmill."

Near the end of the creek I felt like announcing we had gotten skunked and apologizing for building up everyone's expectations, when Trevor thought he saw a moose far ahead. We reassured him that it wasn't, but then we saw it too—a cow moose feeding in the water with only her head visible. She was facing away from us and munching away on the reeds, so we slowly and silently floated down, watching her for about 10 minutes. Finally, when we were about 50 yards away, she swung her big head around and saw us, swam across the creek directly in front of us, and lumbered up the side. She "hid" behind the first row of trees and grunted again and again in a funny way—was she warning her calf or was she scolding us? We paddled by, quite happy to have seen and experienced a moose (but then someone immediately said that what they *really* had wanted was to see a *bull* moose with full antler regalia...). Just before the portage beyond the moose we saw a painted turtle sunning itself on a log.

We had lunch on Rod Lake: Hudson Bay bread (delicious—not really bread, but baked at the base like bars in a pan from oats, ground nuts, butter, sugar, Karo syrup, honey, and maple flavoring) covered with PB&J and with more excellent gorp on the side. From there we continued slogging through streams and marshes. Brian's and Craig's canoes got stuck in one channel and they had to get out into chest-deep muck to haul the canoes through—Brian was laughing and said he loved it, but I don't recall a similar reaction from Craig. Both had to wash themselves off and check for leeches once we got to clear water. Trevor and I had chosen another channel and were able to paddle/pole through it without getting out.

More dragging of canoes through rapids. We saw mergansers and frogs. Too many portages (12 again today)—some were tough! One had a large tree recently blown down blocking the trail—we had to pass canoes over it one by one and make a 90° bend, and it was a relief that John had come back up the portage trail to see if anyone needed help.

John was my sternman crossing one long lake. He's a strong paddler and a natural with the J-stroke—he had no problem at all keeping us moving at a good pace in a straight line. The map case was laid out on the thwart in front of him and he quickly learned to constantly track our position and progress by matching every point and inlet, every narrow section and island, every bay and campsite that he could see with his eyes to where the map said they should be. It's common to hear reports of people who weren't paying attention, took the wrong portage, and ended up very confused and wasting a lot of effort backtracking. We didn't have any problem like that because each canoe had a set of maps and kept track of where we were. Early in the trip, Brian cycled the Scouts through the duffer position in his canoe and taught each one navigation while they sat right in front of him. There were several times when having this skill of canoe country navigation became important—the canoes in back disagreed with where the lead canoe was heading, and turned out to be right. It takes the whole crew to make the trip successful.

Trevor said he couldn't wait to take a shower—that tells you a lot about how tough the trip was for him to get to such a low point! I paddled with every person in the crew at some point in the trip, but Trevor was my bowman (or I

was his) about 80% of the time. He chose not to duff the entire time (many hours) we were paddling into the wind. He was a steady and upbeat bowman—unflagging, uncomplaining, always chatting enthusiastically about something as he paddled without missing a beat. He may not have had the same muscle strength as the other crewmembers, but he matched their effort and did every bit of his share. He also seemed to have found a role in keeping us entertained with stories and quips. I'm so glad we got to have this adventure together.

After one last really tough portage, we ended on a beautiful sandy beach on Louisa Lake and just let our bodies fall into the water and float around, still in our clothes, boots and PFDs, relaxing. The leeches, clearly visible undulating in the water toward our legs, made us alert, though, and we all did careful inspections afterwards. We unpacked gear at this beach campsite at the end of the portage, rested, and made dinner (macaroni/cheese/tuna and Brian's exquisite cheesecake—he and Doug were the champion dessert makers all week), waiting for night to fall so we could do our night paddle to the other end of the lake. Jeremy and Trevor cleaned up after dinner.

Jeremy badly wanted to catch a fish. He managed to convince Doug to show him (again) how to tie a fisherman's knot to connect a lure to a line of one of the fishing poles. Then he decided live bait would increase his chance of catching something, so he snagged a leech and made many valiant efforts to impale it through a random body part on one of the treble barb hooks of an artificial lure while wearing paddling gloves. The leech—what was left of it—was definitely not having a good time. Despite this great effort, Jeremy didn't catch anything.

We packed up at 7:45pm and sat on the beach talking. The wind died down and a pair of loons paddled slowly in a big arc in front of us, calling and calling. I used my digital camera to make audio recordings of them for Nancy. I told a Baden-Powell story about how he canoed in Canada for the first time at age 53, and then as he sat by the fire at the end of the day, described it in his journal with words we could all relate to. We sat silently with eyes closed for a couple of minutes to soak up the sounds, smells, and feelings of this place, with the hope of preserving it for our future memories. At 8:30pm, we headed out onto the lake for Thorns and Roses, and at 9:10pm we started paddling down the lake. The night sky was covered with stars, and Trevor, my sternman, surprised me by identifying more constellations than I could—he had just gotten Astronomy merit badge at Camp Emerald Bay and remembered every one he had learned. Here's what I wrote in my journal the next morning to describe our incredible night paddling experience (with a little post-trip editing):

We wait with anticipation on the sandy north shore of Louisa Lake as the sun sets, then load up our canoes and paddle out a little. Holding the canoes together, we rest after a long day of paddling and portaging, sharing our Thorn and Roses and reading aloud "The Cremation of Sam McGee." Bats fly around and among us, and we are thankful they are harvesting the few mosquitoes that followed us out here. We lean back on packs and decks and listen to a flurry of loon calls as darkness falls.

Once it's completely night, we separate a bit and paddle slowly down the lake. The stars come out one by one and we recognize many constellations. The Milky Way makes its ghostly appearance. Then Mars, glowing so red it startles us, rises dramatically over the hills ringing the lake. Starlight in the water makes the canoes silvery shadows trailing shimmering wakes.

Often we just silently drift on this cloudless, windless night. The dark tree line is deeply silhouetted between the star-filled sky and the lake. Ahead of us, the water is so flat we can recognize constellations by their reflections. Are the stars above us, or are we above the stars?

Loons near and far sing their many songs, and from all directions haunting notes drift across the water. One loon calling loudly in a cove to our right hears its entire laugh completely echoed and repeats it again and again as if irritated by this poorly mannered mimic. No one says much, and when we speak, it is hushed and almost reverent—this is, after all, a sanctuary for the wildlife, and we are the guests.

Finally we hear the sound of Louisa Falls as we quietly approach the bottom of the lake, four miles and two hours later. There's supposed to be a campsite up ahead across from the portage trail, and somehow our Charlie Guide will find it in the dark and we'll set up our tents. But for now, we are silent and humble visitors, suspended in canoes between water and stars in this awesome, timeless wilderness.

That moment is frozen in time—a part of me will always be suspended with Trevor in that canoe in the starlight of Louisa Lake, buoyed by the dark water and the calls of the loons and the camaraderie of the crew. We reached the

campsite at 11:10pm. With our headlamps on we set up our tents and a bear fort to protect our food (saving the 30-60 minutes it usually took for the bear bag system), and fell asleep after midnight. After a day and a half of headwinds, it was nice not to have had any wind at all during the night paddling. To top it off, Doug announced we could sleep in the next morning.

Saturday, August 16—Day 5

Louisa L. → 40 r. → pond → 30 r. to Louisa Falls → L. Agnes → 140 r. → Meadows L. → 193 r. → Sunday L. → 5 r. → Burke L. → 84 r. → Bayley Bay/Basswood L. (9.0 miles and 6 portages)

I awoke at 4:45am despite our late night, lay in my sleeping bag thinking, and then got up to write in my journal. My legs and arms were deeply bruised and battered, bleeding and oozing from all the contacts with rocks and logs (and the rapidly moving canoes on the way to or from my shoulders). Every muscle was sore and I'm sure other crewmembers hurt as well—fortunately, I had brought along some “Northern Tier candy” for aging adults (Tylenol). But I wondered how we could make it over the back-to-back 140-193-rod portages that were facing us that day.

People came out of their tents one by one beginning at 6:45am and lazed around the campsite, resting and talking. Breakfast was cold oatmeal and a breakfast bar. We got off to a late start (9:10am), quickly reaching a portage that led us in two stages to Louisa Falls. The trail that ran next to the falls dropped at approximately the same grade as the falls itself. Brian, of course, nimbly carried his canoe (and then mine) down the precipice with no problem, but Craig and I chose to carry a canoe upright together. Even so, we narrowly escaped ankle- and knee-twisting injuries. The canoe was almost vertical as we passed it down the rock drop-off.

After depositing all our gear in canoes at the bottom of the portage and lodging them on rocks, we hiked back up the trail to the falls. Following Brian's safety lecture, we had a lot of fun playing in the rock-enclosed pool at the base of the powerful falls with its 30-foot drop (standing under the downfall was sort of like taking an atomic shower). No one complained about having to wear a PFD and boots in that situation.

Lunch was at 1:00pm at the Singing Brook portage—crackers with cheese spread, tuna with mayonnaise, and Twizzlers. This was such a late lunch that Jeremy was nearly dead with hunger (and also nearly dead from being strangled for constantly reminding us about being hungry). But here we finally realized that food was his fuel, and as long as you fueled him up every couple of hours his engine ran smoothly and he could paddle forever or carry a canoe, never complaining unless we carelessly let his tank drop to empty again. We had finally figured out Jeremy! Following this formula, Jeremy transformed into a machine that could do anything. He was even volunteering to wash dishes or help with a meal (preferably slicing something up with a knife). After lunch, we cleaned two adjacent campsites and headed out.

Despite being banged up and tired this late in the week, we managed to get across the two tough back-to-back portages that had been looming before us the whole trip. These had long ago been given vulgar nicknames (both starting with B) that befitted their length and the difficulty of their trails. We each got one last Gu packet before the first portage, and I broke out the Snickers bars at the beginning of the second portage, in the process discovering chewing gum I had forgotten about. So it helped on the second portage that we were amped up on Gu, Snickers, and gum, which enabled my jaws to set a rhythm for me to sing “It's a Far Northland” as I carried the canoe. I got to the other end faster than I expected (and so, it seems, did everyone else—they might have been motivated to stay well ahead of the sugar-addled singing to the accompaniment of gum-snapping and random grunts). At a later portage, Jeremy set a Scout record as he lifted, carried, and set down his canoe on the 84-rodder called the “Yellow Brick Road” because it is unusually wide and almost level.

On Bayley Bay of Basswood Lake, the island campsites Doug was aiming for were taken, but we kept paddling and found a so-so one on the mainland (Trevor, Jeremy, and I stayed there to reserve it and to try to imagine half-decent places to pitch our tents on the rough, uneven ground—we cleaned the site while waiting for the others to reconnoiter spots further away) and then shifted to a great campsite on Green Island. Brian, John, and Doug headed out in a canoe to fish (catching nothing) and to check out the mythically tough North Portage from Sunday Bay (not as bad as its reputation).

The rest of us lounged at the campsite. After sitting against a log studying our maps and writing for a while, I was so stiff and sore I couldn't stand up, and had to roll to my side and then on all fours to get up slowly and awkwardly in several steps, accompanied by pointless groaning. Brian and Jeremy made onion rings and a bannock pastry. We

cooked dinner (MRE beef with pasta and dehydrated carrots, followed by Doug's stove-top popcorn drizzled with butter and dusted with brown sugar) and Trevor and Jeremy cleaned up, as they often did. Jeremy kept asking where the washing pot was, where the soap was, where the cleaning pad was, where the...and suddenly he stood up and asked, "Where's the shovel?" and quickly disappeared with it into the woods.

After dinner I worked with Jeremy and Trevor on building a wood fire with one match. The tiny dry twigs they had collected and staged next to larger pieces sprang readily to flame and we sat around the fire for hours, enjoying it and trying to dry various articles of clothing. This was our only campfire of the trip, so we made it last. For some reason there were absolutely no bugs at this campsite, even late into the night. We stayed up late and Thorns and Roses was long and relaxed.

Trevor shared how, in the middle of the 140-rod portage, he was so tired he stopped and tried to rest but lost his balance and "turtled," with arms and legs flailing. He couldn't get up—the best he could do was roll over on his face and lie there on hands and knees. I came by, the last portager in our crew, but with my canoe on I couldn't do anything to help except encourage him and tell him I'd send someone back. He lay there waiting and, since it was all he could do, he started to pray. Suddenly he felt his pack being lifted up, and he managed to get to his feet. Someone asked him, "Are you OK?" He said he was, and turned to look and call out thanks as a man and two boys walked away in the opposite direction. Were they angels or fellow travelers, sent to be there at that moment, not carrying anything despite being in the middle of a portage, just so they could help Trevor?

After Trevor told his story, Craig picked up where he left off because Trevor's experience after standing back up was Craig's rose. As Trevor walked along he met Brian and Craig coming back to help him. Seeing how he was obviously straining, they offered to take his pack, but he was determined to carry it, though his beet-red face was dripping sweat. So they just encouraged him and walked alongside him to the end of the portage. Craig shared how seeing Trevor tough out that portage helped *him* get through the next even longer one (193 rods) when he was getting so tired he felt like quitting. If Trevor could keep going despite the strain, so could he.

On that last long portage, Trevor and I were once again the final two in the crew to head out. I loaded up Trevor with a "personal" pack (sounds light but it is a 70-pound, 30-gallon frameless sack with three people's gear in compression bags squeezed into it—sort of like carrying a bag of very heavy and unwieldy garbage on your back, held on by a few slightly padded straps but without any stabilizing or load-shifting capability normally provided by a frame) then threw my canoe up and headed out, expecting to see him slowly plodding the portage or bogged down at any moment, and figuring I would have to prod him or help him. But to my surprise the trail ahead was clear, and it stayed that way even after I went around a few bends. I was more and more impressed when I didn't see him at every turn. How was he doing it? Here his performance motivated *me* to try harder, and I got pretty excited when I got closer and closer to the end of the portage and kept not seeing him. I was amazed to discover him waiting for me at the other end of the portage, having outpaced me the whole way. He had found some new strength and determination in himself and was able to do far more than he or I thought he could.

Following all this sharing, I told of my rose by reading what I had written in my journal about the previous night's paddling on Louisa Lake, which had been a unique and moving experience for me. I was surprised when everyone applauded after I finished reading it. Then Brian read the forward from [The Singing Wilderness](#) and asked us to share how this wilderness had been singing to us the past week. We sat in darkness lighted only by the softly crackling fire and listened to the distant loons and the restless breeze shifting from treetop to treetop and the gentle lapping of water on the shore as we each answered.

We stayed around the campfire even after this and held a "Q&A with John" so we could learn more about the most mysterious and intriguing member of our crew. I'm not sure John enjoyed it as much as we did, and I think he would disagree with my opinion that it didn't last anywhere near long enough for him to tell his story. I felt like I was only beginning to get to know the interesting stuff that was going on inside his head.

Sunday, August 17—Day 6

Basswood L. → Prairie Portage (20 r.) → Sucker L. → Newfound L. → Moose L. → 30 r. → Sommers Base (12.3 miles and 2 portages)

I awoke at 5:45am and decided to get up to take pictures of the pre-sunrise, then realized I could take a canoe out to enjoy the sunrise while paddling in the peaceful morning air, something that had been my bud and I had been

wishing for the whole trip (we missed it by less than ten minutes on Day 2). I put on a PFD and carried a canoe to the water as quietly as I could so as not to waken anybody else.

It was easy to solo the keeled aluminum canoe, even heading into a wind. Three loons were paddling ahead of me, between my bow and the approaching sunrise, and they kept glancing nervously back at me until I realized I should stop bothering them and let the canoe drift in the wind. What a happy and free feeling to just drift alone in canoe country at dawn, surrounded by nothing but nature. I was enjoying a little Sunday morning worship service when suddenly a bald eagle flew over my canoe and landed in a tree at the nearby shore, where it perched next to another bald eagle. The wind was blowing me directly toward them, and my canoe drifted so close I could see eagle down float off when they shifted their wings. One eagle was not happy with me—he squawked and finally flew away as I drifted closer. He landed in a tree down the shore, but that was exactly where the wind was pushing me. While I was drifting between the two eagles, they would call out to each other, squawking back and forth, possibly annoyed at me and keeping tabs on my slow progress, or perhaps making rude jokes about my apparent inability to paddle, so I decided to leave them alone and return to camp.

As I was leisurely paddling with the wind at my back, I saw in the distance a lone figure stirring in our camp and recognized John from his ever-present blue T-shirt and blue swimsuit. A kindred spirit, rising to greet the dawn? Was he invigorated by the brisk morning air and desiring to commune with the wildlife? Ah, then I can share with him my secret drifting interlude with the eagles and we'll both nod pensively about the wonder of man's relationship with nature...but what's this? He's bending over and seems intent on finding something. Then he straightens up and I see he's holding the cat-hole shovel in one hand and a fistful of toilet paper in the other, and he immediately marches purposefully off into the woods. Oh well. I guess he was hearing a different call of nature.

Once everyone was up, breakfast was elaborate and our only cooked one—scrambled powdered eggs reconstituted thanks to vigorous stirring by Doug and John (recently returned from the woods—that's why we brought Sanigel), sausages, and coffee cake. Trevor, as chaplain's aide, led us in a Sunday morning devotional from Northern Passages on the meaning of the line "For food, for raiment" from the Wilderness Grace that we said as a crew before each dinner: "For food, for raiment,/For life and opportunity,/For sun and rain,/For water and portage trails,/For friendship and fellowship,/We thank thee, O Lord./Amen." He asked us to each contribute what we were or could be doing to provide food and raiment to those in need.

We finally left camp at 10:10am and took a side-trip, paddling to a 3000-year-old cedar tree, then backtracked past our Green Island campsite and on to Canadian customs. We arrived at 12:05pm, crossed Prairie Portage (Doug, John, and Jeremy carried the canoes), and paddled through a cross-wind non-stop back to base. In a bid to save time, we delayed lunch until we made it to base, arriving at 2:55pm (we were supposed to get there at 3pm). Amazingly, Jeremy was able to power-paddle the whole way from Prairie Portage and lead the crew back to camp despite such a long delay in lunch—Craig had discovered that Jeremy has reserve fuel stored away that he can tap into as long as he is convinced he is paddling *toward* lunch. Their canoe was so far ahead as we approached the base that John and I couldn't catch up, even though we burst into racing mode for the last quarter mile.

We arrived at the landing point almost together, kind of burnt out and starving yet triumphant at having met the challenge of the tough route (after setting out, we had rarely even talked about the bailout route). We managed to summon enough energy to scrub and wash our canoes, and then perform one last portage to the remote canoe storage area. We turned in the gear supplied by Northern Tier and finally received our lunch reward at 3:35pm (crackers with various flavors of cheese spreads and trail mix).

While trudging up the trail to our "off-water" crew cabin, Jeremy happened to be walking downwind of me. Now, I'll admit that the cumulative effect of spending a week doing hard work in one set of clothes (we each wore the same synthetic T-shirt and swimsuit every day, and our always-on PFDs had been fully ripened by previous crews) had produced the expected result, so I was not offended when he pondered the thought of the entire crew spending the night in a cabin and carefully asked, "Mr. Gabriel, you're going to take a shower, right?" On the adult side of the shower/sauna building, Craig and I took showers that were brief out of sympathy for the many men still in line behind us (I preceded mine with a visit to the sauna, which I imagine is a wonderful place in the winter), and afterward we all hung around the cluster of crew cabins decompressing and talking to the survivors of Crew G.

We had dinner on the base (ravioli, breadsticks, green beans, and salad bar) and took part in the closing Rendezvous, where we performed our "Wild Animals of the Northwoods" skit. The audience (composed solely of Californians—

Crew G plus three crews from Palo Alto Troop 5) laughed a lot. The crew did a great job of acting out the various fictitious animals, such as the “wet-booted J-stroker,” as I was reading from our script, and afterwards one of the Northern Tier staff complimented us on how original the skit had been. Brian dressed up as a Voyageur and was one of the leaders of the Rendezvous, which blended historical insights, Voyageur songs including “Far Northland,” and crew skits.

Back at the cabin after the Rendezvous, it grew dark and we were packing up our gear for the last time when Brian burst in to tell us the Northern Lights were out. He knew how much we all had wanted to see them (Trevor once shared during Thorns and Roses that his bud was “really really *really really really*” wishing for the Northern Lights), but they had never appeared during our canoe trip. Suddenly full of energy, we dashed outside, turned off all the lights, and admired the great display of shimmering plasma-green streaks and sheets for about an hour—the first time for most if not all of the boys to see the Northern Lights. It was quite an experience and a wonderful way to close the Northwoods chapter of our trip. Then it was finally to bed and sleep about 10:30pm.

Monday, August 18—Day 6+1

Ely, MN → Minneapolis/St. Paul airport → San Jose airport → Cupertino, CA (1863 miles)

We got up at 6:30am, did final packing of our duffel bags, completely loaded every corner of the van (leaving only small pockets of air that we hoped could sustain human life), and ate a great breakfast on the base at 8:00am—scrambled eggs with cheese and ham, hash browns, a donut, and pancakes with blueberry syrup.

We waddled directly to the van and left the base at 8:45am, now with Brian and his gear along. We stopped outside Ely so the Quetico crew could check in with US Customs (it was 9:45am and the place was closed, but we filled out the paperwork saying we had indeed returned to the US—thank you for asking—and left it there), and then through Ely and on south toward Minneapolis. We stopped at 11:40am in a town called, oddly enough, Moose Lake, and ate lunch at Dairy Queen followed (or preceded, in my case) by the frozen treats we had been dreaming about on portage trails, reluctantly leaving at 12:25pm.

We dropped Brian off at his relatives’ house in Richfield, and then returned the van at 2:30pm having driven 281 miles that day. Thrifty quickly shuttled us to the airport. We checked in with Northwest at 2:50pm, about 2.5 hours before the flight, and we made it to the gate at 3:10pm. But mechanical problems delayed the loading and eventually we had to move to another plane, which finally took off at 7:10pm. The flight was fine but we got home more than an hour late and were, of course, pretty tired. All the parents and spouses were waiting there to meet us when we landed at 8:35pm. We told stories about each other until our gear arrived, when we reluctantly had to say our good-byes to fellow crewmembers and adventure-mates.

Highlights and Lowlights

The nature highlights were many. Seeing a moose up close, many bald eagles and loons, merganser ducks, turtles, frogs, bats, leeches, and a great blue heron (and Craig hearing a wolf howling in the night) were our animal highlights. Catching and eating a bass was another (for us—not so much for the bass). The gorgeous country of clean lakes, dense forests, waterfalls, marshes, and rocky cliffs was a never-ending treat to paddle through—I think the dramatic and changing wilderness vistas were part of the reason no one complained about being tired of paddling. We paddled in swirling mists at sunrise, glided on dead calm water at midnight, poled through marshes, dragged through rapids, and hunkered on our knees into whitecaps on a couple of afternoons.

But I would have to say that being a part of Crew F was the biggest and most enduring highlight for me. There were no personal conflicts, just a lot of good fun and hard work together as a team. We bonded as we struggled together against the challenges of long, hard days of paddling and portaging, making the rewards of playing in a waterfall, or paddling under the stars, or eating a blueberry cake cooked over a stove, that much better. It was difficult to end the trip and separate.

I was also impressed by the camping and canoeing abilities of each person in Doug’s crew (and what I heard of Steve’s crew was just as impressive). Everyone got up promptly in the morning, packed quickly, and pitched in to all the crew tasks during the day. Doug led the crew ably, setting the example by working harder than anyone—he impressed us all by quietly choosing the heaviest (food) pack on the first portage. He made good decisions and

distributed the work fairly. No one grumbled about paddling for hours into the wind, and I saw the best paddling skills I've ever seen in the troop when I paddled at the back of the crew. We shared our food and didn't complain about eating cold oatmeal in the morning, because we were all eager to hit the water. No one held the crew back. I think the time we invested preparing and training for this trip was time very well spent—that's what allowed us to have the adventure of a lifetime.

Northern Tier did a very good job of preparing us before the trip and of supplying food and equipment for us. We were quite fortunate to have an extraordinary interpreter in Brian—his experience and encouragement enabled us to cover this very challenging but rewarding route while sticking together as a crew. In my childhood Boundary Waters trips with the Boy Scouts, I never experienced such a variety of things (night paddling, playing in waterfalls, seeing a moose) nor covered so much or so varied ground (and water). The difference was mainly Brian.

Brian also invested a lot of time in teaching Doug how to be a crew chief when many times it would have been easier to just make a decision. He often took Doug aside to give him extra information about what was coming so that Doug would be as prepared as possible and could make well-informed decisions and pronouncements. Doug was always clearly the guy making the choices and assignments throughout the week. But Brian paid attention to each person in the crew. At different times in the trip I would privately mention to Brian how I saw each Scout's strengths and weaknesses and what I was trying to do to help them improve—I didn't realize until I thought about it later that Brian was taking what I said and finding natural opportunities to encourage each Scout about their strengths and to challenge them in the areas where they needed to improve.

The other adults—Craig in Crew F and Ray and Dave in Crew G—were critical for the success of this trip. They all worked hard in preparation for the trip, getting trained in Youth Protection, First Aid/CPR, Safe Swim Defense, and Safety Afloat, paddling with me at Stevens Creek Reservoir and going on the water treks leading up to Northern Tier. During our preparations and on the trip, they pitched in anywhere they could. Craig in particular helped me out a lot with paperwork preparations and, of course, throughout the trip with Crew F, whether it was by encouragement or a 2-man lift at the beginning of a tough portage, or doing extra work around the campsite. While recuperating at a campsite, I don't recall ever offering to help with cooking or cleaning or whatever, but Craig was always going around asking what needed to be done and then tirelessly pitching in to do it—or just doing it without asking.

As for “lowlights,” I would say we worked harder than anyone expected to on Day 2, when we paddled over 16 miles and crossed 12 portages with a nearly full food pack. It took us 10 hours, and we were each completely out of energy at the end of the day. (When paddling on Stevens Creek Reservoir, I taught each person how to develop the most efficient stroke with no wasted energy, because, I said ominously—pausing for effect—*we might be paddling as much as 6 hours per day.*) We seemed to manage the paddling just fine, but I think we all wished we had spent more time before the trip getting stronger and practicing portaging. The crew was a little young for that particular day—this would have been an easier route for 15-16 year-olds rather than our 13-14 year-olds, but on the other hand, conquering that massive challenge really boosted everyone's self-esteem and contributed to the bonding and crew-pride we experienced on the trip. In retrospect, I don't think I would want to change even Day 2, because that would have altered the unique and powerful development of our crew spirit.

Despite John's bass, I think both crews didn't eat as much fish as they had hoped to. We didn't put much emphasis on fishing during the trek planning, just leaving it up to interested people to bring their own poles and lures. Next time we might put more focus on preparing for fishing—learning what is the best bait and the best locations, times, and techniques for catching fish like walleyes and northern pike. We heard of people traveling at the same time as us who ate fish every day, so the fish were out there. Of course, we also didn't allocate that much time to serious fishing on our trip.

No one was injured beyond what a band-aid could cover. John had a burn on his hand from splattered grease after frying the fish he caught. He silently endured the stings, and we didn't even know about it until Jeremy took over the frying and immediately informed us of his constant pain. Sunburn was minor because people usually wore hats and regularly shared sunblock. No one got dehydrated because of the constant emphasis by the leaders—particularly Brian—on drinking water. We went through about three quarts per person per day, needed largely because of constant sun and wind exposure combined with pretty heavy sweating on portages. I noticed that I was dripping sweat from my face like a badly leaking faucet for the 10-20 minutes it took to negotiate the longer portages. The filter gave out late in the trip, but even bleached water tasted perfectly fine.

Thoughts for the Future

Crew F had a very difficult route, and there were times on Day 2 when I was struggling with a canoe over a rough portage and wondering if I could make it, *why* we had come and whether we would *ever* come back. I'm sure others were having similar questions. But the hard work of Day 2 brought us into idyllic remote country by Day 3 and throughout the rest of the trip, where we experienced waterfalls, fishing, and swimming; saw loons, a moose and bald eagles; and witnessed rugged terrain and beautiful sunrises and sunsets. This was one of the best experiences I've had in my life. By the end of the trip, we each knew we **MUST** return to Northern Tier. I think our Scouts will demand that Northern Tier be on the troop's itinerary in 2-4 years. In fact, they are already asking for it.

Northern Tier is actually composed of three sites: the Charles L. Sommers base in Ely (Northern Tier headquarters and where we went) and Atikokan and Bissett bases in Canada. The Canada bases are more expensive and time-consuming to get to. They would provide an even more remote wilderness experience, but for next time I think it would be best for us to return to Sommers. From Sommers, crews go either into the Boundary Waters or the Quetico. Comparing my childhood Boundary Waters experiences and this Quetico experience, it's clear that the Quetico can be more rugged and demanding, particularly on the portage trails. Our interpreter agreed with this assessment, since he took crews to both regions this summer. One reason for the difference is that the US Forest Service actively maintains the Boundary Waters and allows Order of the Arrow crews to come in, rebuild portages, construct bridges over swamps, etc. Latrines are built at each campsite. Canada takes a mostly inactive role in maintaining the Quetico—the portage trails can be very rough with large rocks to climb over or downed trees to pass equipment above or below. There are no latrines—we dug cat-holes 200 feet from the water when we had to go to the bathroom. Another difference is that the US allows 250,000 people into the Boundary Waters each year, whereas Canada only allows 20,000 into the Quetico. The net result is the Quetico is more truly wilderness—rugged, remote, and with fewer people. The Boundary Waters can be a somewhat easier place to travel, but you will see more people and may not get the campsite you wanted (or, like Crew G, you'll have to get up at 4:30am so that you'll arrive at a good campsite before noon—they got the coveted "Hilton" campsite with this technique, arriving at 10:30am and turning away disappointed crews beginning at 11am).

Next time I think we should send our first-timers to the Boundary Waters and our second-timers to the Quetico. Exceptions for going to the Quetico can be made for older Scouts or those with unusually good upper body strength, coordination, and paddling skills. We might require that Quetico trippers demonstrate the ability to portage a canoe over rough, slippery ground and then carry my Canada pack loaded with two 44-pound bags of dog food (approximating the weight of the food pack if not the taste of its contents). On the Crew F route we had 41 portages, and even though the Scouts portaged canoes on only 3-4 of them, that was a very welcome psychological and physical relief for the adults who otherwise had to carry canoes on every portage. Based on the experiences of the two crews this time, I think it would be good to upgrade to 2-3 lightweight We-No-Nah Kevlar Champlain canoes for each crew next time. It will add cost but it will make portaging easier and safer for adults and Scouts alike.

My parents have invited us to use their home as a training base again next time, and I think that would be a good idea. The timing of flights and the requirement to show up at Northern Tier at 1pm guarantees that we have to spend a night somewhere in Minnesota. Most troops spend it in a hotel or dorm. Besides enjoying my parents' hospitality, it was quite valuable to take advantage of their lakeshore setting to get a feel for wet-boot portaging before showing up at the base, and to be able to paddle together as a crew. Next time we might spend more time working on portaging—not just having each person lift the canoe but simulating an efficient portage where a fully loaded canoe paddles to the water's edge, everyone gets out and grabs a pack or the canoe, they walk together out of the water, circle back, put down the canoe, load it up, get in, and paddle away. I can't think of any reasonable place for us to practice portaging like this other than my parents' home or Northern Tier.

Reservations for Northern Tier begin on April 1 for the summer of the following year. To reserve a spot for the summer of 2005, for instance, would require us to call in a reservation in spring 2004. Late reservations are possible but there will be less choice of spots. Although July is the most popular month, mid-August is fine—there are fewer bugs and people plus cooler temperatures, offset slightly by shorter days and not many blueberries.

As the program director told us at the end of the Rendezvous program, one of the many bugs that bit us at Northern Tier was the Northwoods bug. Fortunately, it was the only one that left a lasting mark, and the main symptom is a chronic longing to go back. I'm certain some day soon our troop will. Dibs on being the adult trek leader!